VISIT…

Narration in the Fiction Film

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1. Mimetic Theories of Narration

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle distinguishes among the means of imitation (the medium, such as painting or language), the object of imitation (some aspect of human action), and the mode of imitation (how something is imitated). He goes on to isolate three possible modes: "The poet may imitate by narration—in which he can either take another personality as Homer does or speak in his own person unchanged—or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us."[1] The basic difference is between telling and showing. The secondary difference lies within the category of telling: does the poet speak in his own voice or through a character's? These formulations are troubling in many ways, and the dust has not yet settled on all the controversies around them. I shall employ Aristotle's distinction simply in order to demarcate two influential conceptions of narration. *Diegetic* theories conceive of narration as consisting either literally or analogically of verbal activity: a telling. This telling may be either oral or written. I will consider prominent diegetic theories of filmic narration in Chapter 2. *Mimetic* theories conceive of narration as the presentation of a spectacle: a showing. Note, incidentally, that since the difference applies only to "mode" of imitation, either theory may be applied to any medium. You can hold a mimetic theory of the novel if you believe the narrational methods of fiction to resemble those of drama, and you can hold a diegetic theory of painting if you posit visual spectacle to be analogous to linguistic transmission. The Aristotelian distinction enables us to compare the two principal traditions of narrative representation and to examine how film theory has drawn upon each one.

Aristotle's conception of *mimesis* applies primarily to theatrical performance. According to Gerald Else, the earliest meaning of the word was something like "the imitation of animate beings, animal and human, by the body and the voice (not necessarily the singing voice), rather than by artefacts such as statues or pictures."[2] By Plato's time, however, the term had been stretched to include imitations in painting and sculpture. Later, mimetic powers were claimed for language in itself; in the *Cratylus*, Plato himself seems to have held this belief. Gérard Genette has minutely traced the history of those theories of language based on the assumption that oral or written language imitates visual or acoustic properties of the referent. We shall see how the concept of mimesis was extended to prose fiction and, eventually, to cinema. For now, we can briefly consider how mimetic theories were applied in their most proximate domains: theater and painting.

Perspective as Narration

Mimetic theories take as their model the act of vision: an object of perception is presented to the eye of the beholder. This model underlies the changes in representational practice introduced by Greek theater and painting and, later, several Renaissance arts. "Perspective" in its various senses then emerges as the central concept for explaining narration.

What survives of the *Poetics* treats theatrical performance as the principal instance of mimesis, and it is in fifth-century Athenian theater that we can find the key assumptions of the mimetic tradition of narration. The very word *theatron* means "seeing place," and the early Greek theater took as much account of sight lines as of acoustics: seats arranged in a semicircle, an orchestra in the center, and a stage behind the players. The Greek theater differs significantly from the circular staging of primitive cultures and from more processional or ambulatory forms (e.g., parade, carnival), in that a specific space is marked off as fictional and the audience occupies a limited arc of vantage points onto that space. Around 425 B.C., the addition of a wooden proscenium further demarcated the stage space, framing it for viewing. Moreover, the decoration of the stage brought into play principles derived from optics. According to Proclus Diadochus, a commentator on Euclid, optical science includes scenography, "which shows how objects at various distances and of various heights may be so represented in drawings that they will not appear out of proportion and distorted in shape."[3] It is probable that by the fifth century the stage was painted to represent both natural landscapes and architectural settings. Four centuries later, in an ambiguous and contentious passage, the architect Vitruvius speaks of the Athenians' having employed a scenographic construction using lines which "correspond by natural law to the sight of the eyes."[4] From this passage and from fragmentary evidence in surviving Greek painting, Erwin Panofsky and John White have concluded that the Athenian artist possessed a coherent conception of what we would call central linear perspective. At least it seems very likely that Aristotle's Greece had in both its theater and its painting a tacit awareness of how to calculate visual spectacle in relation to the spectator's sight. This awareness inaugurates a mimetic theory of narration in the visual arts.

The Greek theater raised and confronted the central problems that haunt the mimetic tradition: How is the space of the story to be presented, and where is the spectator in relation to it? In theater or painting, story space may be represented as three-dimensional by various means (occlusion or overlap, familiar size, size diminution, lighting effects, etc.). Many nonperspectival painting systems signal depth through these cues. Egyptian painting makes considerable use of overlap to pick out planes, while medieval miniatures add information through size cues. In all representational painting or theater, these factors continue to play a large part. Nonetheless, all these monocular cues are localized in their effect: they do not determine the depth of the depicted world in any homogeneous and systematic way. Nor is the spectator's relation to the total space defined precisely. These became the tasks of various systems of perspective.

In the history of art, the concept of perspective has been most closely bound up with painting, so I will initially con-

fine my exposition to that medium. Only after we have surveyed perspective in the graphic arts can we understand how it has shaped theater as well. Perspective (from the Italian, *prospettiva*) means, we are reminded often enough, "seeing through"—a handy way to recognize that both the object (the depicted world) and the subject (the viewer) are bound together through the picture plane. There are several different perspective systems, distinguished on the basis of how each renders parallel straight edges in the depth of the represented space. (Chapter 7 discusses them in more detail.) Many of these are "nonscientific" in that they rest on no theory of sight; as systems for organizing pictorial space, they remain powerful but intuitive. The "scientific" perspective systems formulated during the Renaissance were of two principal types: linear and synthetic. In linear perspective, orthogonal lines converge to one, two, or three vanishing points. (The most-discussed variant is "central" or Albertian perspective, in which orthogonals converge to a single central vanishing point.) Synthetic perspective, proposed by Leonardo da Vinci, renders some parallel edges as curves on the picture plane. Both "scientific" systems presuppose a rule-governed, measurable scenic space organized around the optical vantage point of an implied spectator.

Except for the disputed passage in Vitruvius, little consistent practice or explicit theory of scientific perspective existed prior to the Renaissance. Before the fourteenth century, there seem to have been few attempts to depict the geometrically correct orientation of the facets of cubical and rectangular solids—rooms, pavements, facades, tabletops, and other familiar features of Western life. Giotto and some Sienese painters began to treat architectural volumes in more depth, usually by employing a vanishing axis construction. In the early fifteenth century many Italian painters started to represent enclosed interiors and finite open spaces through central perspective. The theory, as explained by Alberti, posited that light rays traveled in a straight line (hence the "linearity" of perspective) and gathered in a bundle at the eye, forming a visual pyramid. A picture plane was then a cross section of that pyramid. By use of Euclidean geometry, the artist could make a point-for-point replica of the rays on the picture plane. The scene's space was now visibly, mathematically measurable—continuous, consistent, and finite. The artist could apply rules of geometrical proportion to make parallel lines meet and to assure that figures diminished as they distributed themselves in depth. Leonardo revised Alberti's account by suggesting that the picture plane show foreshortening not only in depth but also horizontally and vertically and thus make straight lines project as curved. This was an attempt to copy the image's spherical curvature on the retina. With scientific perspective, the painting represented the spectator as a single eye, literally a point of view.[5]

What scientific perspective creates, then, is not only an imaginary scene but a fixed, imaginary witness. No longer are objects the only thing that painting can measure; now the artist can measure empty space—and not just the spaces between objects but the distance between the scene and the beholder. We witness the birth of a theatrical scenography of painting. Space is autonomous, a grid or checkerboard or stage preexisting any arrangement of objects upon it. In 1467, the Paduan painter Squarcione contracted to teach a pupil "the system of the floor, well-drawn in my manner; and to put figures on the said floor here and there at different points, and to put objects on it—chairs, benches, and houses . . ."[6] At the same time, the boundaries of the painting became identified with the edges of a window, and the picture plane becomes as transparent as glass: Alberti asks the painter to imagine "an open window through which I see what I want to paint."[7] Much later, the Soviet Constructivist painter Tarabukin contended that Oriental inverse perspective placed the spectator at the center of a scene that surrounded him.[8] By contrast, in Albertian perspective, the scene exists as a three-dimensional event staged for a spectator whose eye is the picture's point of intelligibility but whose place is closed off from the event witnessed.

In fact, the theory of scientific perspective did not coincide with artists' practice. Northern European painters took up central projection and geometrically correct foreshortening late, and in the wake of Dürer's writings and graphic work the north tended to employ more oblique and "wide-angle" views. In Italy as well there was much mixing of systems. Two- and three-point perspective, to become important in

baroque art, introduced complications into the Albertian system. Moreover, the strength of mathematical perspective, its ability to render plane surfaces and regular architectural solids and hollows, did not apply to other subjects, such as landscapes or animate bodies. Not until Leonardo did painters discover that to represent such subjects straight lines afforded less useful schemata than arcs. As a result, the scientific perspective picture often reveals a conflict between an accurate rendition of architectural space and a distorted construction of the human figure. We should also remember that Italian artists violated rules to achieve particular purposes. One problem of central perspective was that the strongest visual spot for the important element was also the most distant point in the picture space; to center something was also to make it small. Painters had to compromise between compositional and scenographic demands. John White has listed ways in which the painter could keep the eye from getting carried off into depth: by breaking orthogonals into short lengths, by putting the vanishing point "within" a foreground object, by using cool colors in the foreground, and so on.[9] Perspective was not an ironclad formula; proportions, orthogonals, and other depth effects could be modified to suit the overall design and the story that the painting had to tell.

Whether or not Vitruvius was describing a system of central perspective in his remarks on Athenian stagecraft, for many centuries theater design and staging made only limited use of perspective principles. In the Hellenistic theater a house at each edge of the stage provided some cues for depth, and in the Roman era, with the stage and proscenium having become the playing space and the site of the story action, the theater architect could calculate sight lines more exactly. During the Middle Ages, staging became even less dependent upon perspective. Scenes might be presented on pageant wagons lumbering past the audience; the stage scene might simply be a neutral, open area; or a "mansion," a curtained cube representing a room or house, would adjoin an unlocalized acting area. In all cases, the dramatic action could be viewed from three or all four sides. Medieval staging practices continued well into the 1500s, long after scientific perspective painting had become the norm. Only with the revival of interest in classical theater and the reprinting of Vitruvius's treatise in 1486 did Renaissance theaters begin to apply Albertian principles to stage space. The Italian theater would contain a modified Roman stage, a platform backed by a continuous facade, but now linear perspective painting would form the basis of scenic design.

Perspective principles shaped the organization of Renaissance stage space, the conception of the spectator, and the architecture of the theater. The characteristic scenic locale became a street vista, which supplied many architectural features and a conventional central vanishing point. At first, scene painters applied perspective to a flat backdrop and two projecting wings; later, angle wings, staggered at regular intervals, yielded a sense of many planes receding into depth. The stage floor could be sloped accordingly. The Renaissance theater also used the proscenium to frame the stage picture. George Kernodle finds many precedents for the proscenium in medieval art and theater, and he shows that in the Renaissance the proscenium (like the curtain) came to demarcate a picture plane for the action.[10] The proscenium also blocked backstage areas from view, thus masking the mechanisms that produced the stage illusion. Like Alberti's windowpane, the proscenium frontispiece finally closed off the spectator from the world of the narrative action.

If the Italian theater thus became truly a "seeing place," around whose vantage point was the spectacle to be calculated? It is significant that the theaters of the populace and the academies never utilized perspective effects to the degree employed in aristocratic theaters. Perspective scenography developed in the context of court festivities, with their large stage mansions and extensive machinery. As a result, the perspective eyepoint was determined by the position of the ruler's box in the auditorium. Indeed, entire theaters came to be built around the vantage point of the duke's or cardinal's seat; the sight lines of other seats were correspondingly distorted.

Subsequent staging elaborated upon Renaissance practice. In the late seventeenth century, the proscenium became a more neutral (though still decorative) border, and scenographers like the Bibiena family exploited oblique

perspective to yield two vanishing points. Such effects had already been achieved in baroque paintings, such as Tintoretto's *Discovery of the Body of St. Mark.* Eventually, the Italians' insistence upon a distinct stage space spread to other countries, though England and France were tardy in banishing spectators from the stage. The baroque theater broadened and deepened stage space, no longer planning perspective from the patron's box but still calculating sight lines with respect to the segregation of seats by social class. During the late eighteenth century, the box set began to be employed to represent interiors, on the grounds that it enhanced realism and blocked any view of offstage areas; box sets also employed perspective foreshortening on floors and ceilings. And the limited evidence we have suggests that the placement of actors in the post-Renaissance court theaters conformed to perspective principles, with actors arranged symmetrically around a central axis and grouped into recessive diagonals.[11] In sum, the perspective stage, with its picture, frame, and calculated audience viewpoint, dominated Western theater from about 1645 until the early twentieth century.

Perspective, in its various guises, is the central and most fully elaborated concept within the mimetic tradition of narration. Perspective conventions grew up as storytelling devices. E. H. Gombrich has suggested that Greek art took as its purpose the rendition of characters in action at specific moments in a story.[12] Similarly, the Greek theater sought to represent historical events, and stage painting was to assist this effort. When the Renaissance church demanded that biblical tales and ecclesiastical history be taught through art, perspective painting attempted to represent a story as if seen through the church wall framing it. Alberti laid great stress on *istoria*, the painting's faithful representation of a narrative. The eventual elimination of written language from Western painting can be traced to the greater mimetic role assigned to figurative representation. And the post-Renaissance theater reveals the continuous employment of perspective as the key to the construction of an ideal viewer's orientation toward an enacted story.

In the mimetic tradition, narration equals showing and reception equals perceiving, but the convolutions of scientific perspective in practice reveal that both showing and perceiving need not respect geometrical verisimilitude. Narrative significance is conveyed through an idealized spectacle and an idealized perception. Most painters' compromises with "pure" perspective theory issue from specific demands of storytelling; that is, the best possible way to understand the story action may not correspond to a geometrically consistent construction. And just as the perspective stage is still intelligible when not seen from the patron's box, so the perspective picture coheres even when its implied vantage point contradicts the picture's placement in the church architecture. The narrative pressures of mimesis make perspective, in all its avatars, more a mental system than an optical one.

Perspective and Point of View in Literature

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, writers began to subsume various arts under a single category and started to draw parallels among them. A misunderstanding of one of Horace's remarks led to a doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* ("Poetry should be like a speaking picture"). With the rise of the novel, not only poetry but prose fiction came to be thought of in mimetic terms. "A novel," wrote Smollett, "is a large diffused picture."[13] George Eliot described narration as exemplifying "the superior mastery of images and pictures in grasping the attention."[14] Flaubert criticized his *Sentimental Education* for lacking "the illusion of perspective."[15] For Trollope, creating character was a matter of crowding "the canvas" with "real portraits."[16] Dickens drew the analogy to theater: "Every writer of fiction . . . writes, in effect, for the stage."[17] Indeed, the comparison of novel with play was common in English criticism by the 1840s.[18] It remained for Henry James to suggest a thoroughgoing mimetic theory of literary narration and for Percy Lubbock to popularize the conception of the novel as spectacle.

Like his predecessors, James presupposes the novel to be a pictorial art. "The novelist can only fall back on that—on his recognition that man's constant demand for what he has to

offer is simply man's general appetite for a *picture*. The novel is of all pictures the most comprehensive and the most elastic."[19] James develops this commonplace notion by analogies drawn from vision. The writer's technical devices include "reflectors," strategies of "framing and encircling," places of focus, and of course the concept of "point of view." James explicitly develops point of view as a post-Renaissance perspectival metaphor. Dwelling in the "house of fiction," looking through windows that give onto "the human scene" with his eyes or "at least with a field-glass," the writer scans the world.[20]

"Dramatize, dramatize!" With this famous injunction James signals another scenographic assumption in his theory. The novel is not one picture; it is a series of scenes, as on the stage. James boasted of seeing "dramas within dramas" which still created "an object adorably pictorial."[21] His description of point of view in *The Wings of the Dove* evokes an Italianate perspective stage: "So, if we talk of princesses, do the balconies opposite the palace gates, do the coignes of vantage and respect enjoyed for a fee, rake from afar the mystic figure in the gilded coach as it comes forth into the great *place*."[22]

James's principal disseminator, Percy Lubbock, developed the pictorial and theatrical analogies into a set of critical categories. "A novel is a picture, a portrait," he asserts, and refers to fiction's windowed vistas, foreshortening, and point of view.[23] But Lubbock grasps the shortcoming of the pictorial analogy; the "viewless art of literature" unfolds only in time, offering no measurable object like a painting.[24] Therefore Lubbock seeks to strengthen the analogy with drama. The novel can "place the scene before us, so that we may take it in like a picture gradually unrolled or a drama enacted."[25] Lubbock goes on to distinguish two narrational methods: the pictorial, which represents the action in the mirror of a character's consciousness; and the dramatic, which neutrally presents "the visible and audible facts of the case."[26] The novel, in Lubbock's theory, synthesizes the two arts of vision, the perspective painting with its stability and the stage play with its temporal unfolding.

Both James and Lubbock ignore the fact that novels are made of words. To conceive of literary art as a form of spectacle is to treat the novel as having no speaker. James and Lubbock collapse the question "Who speaks?" into the question "Who sees and knows?" In his novels, James strives to find a "center of consciousness" whose restricted point of view motivates the fine sensory and psychological texture of the book's verbal fabric. Lubbock calls this center of consciousness "the mind that really commands the subject."[27] By confining the text to the limited viewpoint of the implied subject of the perspectival picture, the novelist makes language a vehicle for vision. Lubbock contrasts this "scenic" method with one in which the author intervenes "with his superior knowledge."[28] Yet even this intervention is not conceived of as a linguistic act: Lubbock calls this the panoramic method, a way of revealing a wider range of vision than that commanded by a character. Lubbock's very term, borrowed from the visual arts, has its own history, stretching back to Giovanni Servandoni's "mute spectacles" and Daguerre's deceptive panoramas. While Lubbock proposes the scenic and panoramic categories as logically equivalent options, in fact "the scene holds the place of honor."[29] The scenic method plays down language more effectively: instead of stating his attitudes directly, the author can dramatize them. Lubbock criticizes *War and Peace* for its uncontrolled panoramic portions, while praising the farmyard auction in *Madame Bovary* for its lack of authorial intervention. He writes of Maupassant: "The machinery of his telling, by which they [events] reach us, is unnoticed; the story appears to tell itself."[30] For Lubbock, the novel fulfills itself when it imitates an action and when the novelist's language functions as a tactful proscenium frame.

It is not necessary to trace the subsequent developments of the perspectival theory of narration: suffice it to say that in the work of D. W. Harding, Norman Friedman, Wayne Booth, and Wolfgang Iser, the pictorial and theatrical analogies get extended. The new wrinkle is the addition of another art available for comparison—cinema. For Elizabeth Bowen, the novel possesses a "camera eye"; the novelist resembles not a painter but a filmmaker.[31] And Roger Fowler says that the narrator of Hemingway's "The Killers" occupies "a defi-

nite viewing position, like a fixed camera."[32] In the mimetic tradition of narration, then, it has become common to compare literary narration to that of a film. All of which assumes cinema to be yet another perspectival art.

The Invisible Observer

Insofar as film theory before 1960 possesses a theory of narration, it is drawn from the mimetic tradition. In film, writes Frances Marion, the story is "not told but *dramatized.*"[33] Hugo Münsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim begin theorizing from the assumption that a film is a string of images, and however much they strive to distinguish cinema from theater, neither writer seeks to define cinema outside the domain of spectacle. Lev Kuleshov advocates plotting actors' movements as if they occurred in a web of rays that ran from the scene to gather at the camera lens—a complete replica of Albertian perspective principles. André Bazin also acknowledges the centrality of visual spectacle: a normal narrative film, he asserts, is like a photographed play, with the changes in camera position selecting and stressing certain details. But traditional film theory goes beyond this general adherence to the mimetic tradition; it creates a perspectival eye for cinema, one we can call the invisible observer.

On this account, a narrative film represents story events through the vision of an invisible or imaginary witness. The idea can be found circulating within American filmmaking fairly early, and some aspects are present in Münsterberg's reflections on cinema. But the most explicit formulation occurs in V. I. Pudovkin's 1926 monograph *Film Technique*. According to Pudovkin, the camera lens should represent the eyes of an implicit observer taking in the action. By framing the shot a certain way, and by concentrating on the most significant details of the action, the director compels the audience "to see as the attentive observer saw." The change of shot will then correspond to "the natural transference of attention of an imaginary observer."[34] Pudovkin works out an elaborate example wherein cutting conveys the impression of a spectator watching a street encounter and casting his glance from one participant to another. Pudovkin even suggests that quickening the tempo of editing can replicate in the viewer the mounting excitement of the invisible witness. In later writings, he extended the theory to sound as well, with the microphone taking the place of the observer's ears. The result of the theory was a conception of film as presenting us with "an observer ideally mobile in space and time."[35]

Pudovkin's formulation came to be widely accepted and served a variety of tactical ends. For one thing, the invisible-observer model presupposed orthodox spatial construction. Continuity editing was implicit in Pudovkin's example of a witness who turns his attention from one detail to another; rooted to the spot, the witness remains on the same side of the axis of action or "180° line." Apologists for mainstream narrative filmmaking seized on this model to explain practices of continuity editing. By cutting from long shot to closer view, write Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, the director supplies a "psychologically accurate" depiction of the normal process of seeing a detail.[36] At the same time, the invisible observer, incarnated in the camera, could be identified with the narrator. Pudovkin had also claimed that the camera lens was the director's eye and that cutting expressed the filmmaker's emotional attitude. Later writers came to see the camera itself as the film's storyteller, the narrator's "point of view" on the action. Thus the invisible-witness model became classical film theory's all-purpose answer to problems involving space, authorship, point of view, and narration.

The incompatibilities in the invisible-observer account were not so much resolved as patched together. Pudovkin claimed that by utilizing the invisible observer's perceptions, film style could mimic ordinary experience. The shot would correspond to a brute perceptual datum. The cut would then mimic a psychological process, that of the shift of attention. Thus we grasp not only what the invisible observer sees but the manner in which he interprets the surroundings. In practice, however, camera work and cutting often tax the capacities of an invisible witness. A high or low camera angle might violate plausible viewer positions, while cuts from one

locale to another could hardly be justified as faithful renditions of perception. Consequently, theorists seized upon Pudovkin's hint that the spectator was *ideally* mobile. According to Ivor Montagu, for instance, cinema makes the viewer an "ideal observer" who can see "aspects which would normally be unavailable to an observer in real life."[37] One Hollywood practitioner writes that the camera is an observer "who can see an object or an occurrence from all and every side, angle, and distance."[38] The invisible witness thus became an omnipresent one as well, endowed with a ghostly ubiquity. Yet this formulation posed new problems. If the imaginary witness represented not only the spectator but, first of all, the artistic consciousness of the filmmaker, any flaunting of the filmmaker's omnipresence could break the basic analogy between film style and phenomenal experience (shots as views, cuts as shifts of attention). Hence some thinkers imposed a sanction: the camera could go anywhere, but it shouldn't. "The ideal spectator," notes Ivor Montagu, "must be an ideally placed *possible* spectator."[39] In effect, many classical theorists were suggesting that a narrative film employs an omniscient narrator, but they insisted that the film should limit our awareness of that omniscience. The invisible observer became the cinematic equivalent of the idealized implied viewer of the perspective picture or the effaced narrating consciousness of Lubbock's "scenic" novel.

As these claims suggest, the theory was initially used to valorize a cinema of cutting, of either the Hollywood or the Soviet variety. Pudovkin and his followers set the invisible-observer approach against a method of filming that was distanced, inert, theatrical, and opposed to our immersion in the flux of everyday life. Eventually, though, the theory's premises were stretched to accommodate other film techniques. Camera movement could be compared to bodily mobility: a pan or tilt represented a turning of the head, a tracking shot corresponded to striding forward or traveling back. In the agile hands of Bazin, even the unmoving long take—the prototype of Pudovkin's "theatrical" cinema—could be likened to the total phenomenal field available to a witness on the scene. Bazin grants that classical editing mimics human acts of attention; he simply adds that those acts normally operate in an a priori field of choice. Since an event exists within a continuum, a director who cuts denies us the perceptual options that a real observer on the scene would possess. The long take and staging in depth give the spectator the ability to create a mental decoupage as if he were actually on the scene.[40] Whatever technique came to be privileged by any theorist or critic, the anthropomorphic premise of the invisible-observer account went unchallenged.

It is not hard to find empirical fault with the invisible-observer account. It must ignore many stylized techniques which cannot correspond to optical processes (split screen, wipes, negative filming, "impossible" camera positions and movements). It presupposes continuity cutting to be the closest representation of actual perception. It forgets that even in ordinary films, the camera's position changes in ways that cannot be attributed to a shift in a spectator's attention. The model works wholly at a localized, "atomic" level: it seeks to explain only this cut or that image, not whole sequences or films. And the account can ludicrously distort the workings of film style.

Consider one striking example. It is a critical commonplace that the low camera height favored in the films of Yasujiro Ozu corresponds to the viewpoint of an invisible Japanese witness, with the camera lens becoming the eyes of a seated guest. The model here teeters into absurdity, since Ozu uses this height indoors or out, in theaters and factories as well as homes, down the aisles of streetcars, and so forth. Why should an observer be squatting on the street or in an office corridor? Furthermore, a theory of narration that assumes an invisible observer distorts the very data it seeks to explain. Ozu's camera is not at a constant height. In general, his lens axis will cross the filmed object at the middle or at some lower point. If the object is six feet tall, the camera may be three feet off the ground. But if the object is a table or a skyscraper, the camera's height may vary from a few inches to many yards. Looking for an invisible observer has caused critics to miss this simple compositional strategy: the height of a seated person is only one position which

1.1. Lady Windermere's Fan
1.2. Lady Windermere's Fan

Ozu's camera may occupy. The invisible-witness model tempts critics to accept the comfort of banal familiarity and to overlook the specific qualities of particular films.

The model faces more deep-seated theoretical difficulties. Even if we put aside the contradictions in the notion of "an ideally placed possible spectator," we must recognize that analogies to phenomenal perception tend to "naturalize" the operations of film style. Camera and microphone become anthropomorphic, stationed like a person before a real phenomenon. The imaginary observer becomes a subject before the objective world of the story action. Yet staging an event to be filmed is no less part of fictional moviemaking than is camera placement or editing. The imaginary witness account forgets that in cinema, fictional narrative begins not with the framing of a preexistent action but with the construction of that action to start with. As Käte Hamburger has put it, "While a concrete reality exists because it exists, a fictional reality exists only by virtue of the fact that it is narrated."[41]

Figure 1.1 is a fairly ordinary shot. It is not just the camera placement that makes the shot a maximally communicative view of the group. The characters' positions are arranged for the sake of cogent viewing. Few groups of people would spontaneously arrange themselves into such a perfect wedge of visibility—frontal and three-quarters views, careful spacing, unimpaired access to glances and expressions. (The composition in fact employs many of the conventions of perspective painting and theater—heads along horizon lines, recessive placement of figures, modified frontality.) Moreover, as the shot develops, other women gather around the central one, but their final station points all continue to provide a view of her (fig. 1.2). The invisible-observer model, being wholly concerned with space, cannot explain how action develops to prolong maximum visibility. In fact, when another woman comes into the frame and blocks our view of the central figure (fig. 1.3), the shot ends; the temporal development of the shot had its own teleology. In the fiction film, not only the camera position but the mise-en-scène, as it unfolds in time and space, is addressed to the spectator. It is not that the camera chooses the best spot from which to

1.3. Lady Windermere's Fan

capture an independently existing event; figures, lighting, setting, and costume are constructed so as to make sense only from certain vantage points. From this we can draw a conclusion to which we will often return. All film techniques, even those involving the "profilmic event," function narrationally, constructing the story world for specific effects.

Now a classical theorist may reply that we nonetheless ignore artifices of mise-en-scène and believe that the camera and the editing are simply trailing a solid, independently existing world. To which one can agree; with the proviso that this impression of an invisible observer facing an autonomous world is an effect of the film's construction. The invisible observer is not the *basis* of film style but only one *figure* of style. The observer's ubiquity, the verisimilitude of perception, and the very sense that this filmed world could be known independently—all are formal effects. Like the novelist's commanding consciousness or the implied viewer of a picture, the invisible observer is created to be ideal, solely for the purposes of narration.

Historically, the invisible-observer model has fulfilled some worthwhile functions. It provided classical film theory with a rudimentary conception of narrative representation, one consonant with post-Renaissance assumptions about the properties of perspectival vision. And the model did, however unwittingly, point to one salient stylistic figure of classical narrative filmmaking: the camera as ideal witness. But the model has also led to inexact and insipid analyses of films, and it has blocked our grasping the range of styles at work in cinema. It has leaned excessively upon the eye-camera analogy and minimized the narrational role of other film techniques. In sum, the invisible-observer model lacks coherence, breadth, and discrimination.

Eisenstein: Narration as Scenography

In 1934, Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov began to draw up plans for a rehearsal hall in which to train film actors.[42] This building is a paradox, a theater that tries to overcome the heritage of the theater. There is a main stage with two others flanking it. The main stage rotates. The spectators sit on a central disc which also rotates, turning them toward the acting area at the proper moment. Walls may be opened to reveal the landscape outside. A bridge runs from the main stage into the auditorium, so that actors may come forward to play in "close-up." There is also a conveyor belt on which an actor can run in place or "pan" past the spectator. A "cinefied" rehearsal hall, in short, with all the perspectival assumptions of the traditional stage revised in the light of contemporary film practice. Examples of this sort also emerged from Eisenstein's directing classes at the State Cinema Institute, when he would start to plan the staging of a play in an orthodox theater and then introduce complicated stage machinery to simulate what could be simply accomplished in cinema.[43]

In such ways we see Eisenstein's debt to the mimetic tradition. Despite his occasional use of linguistic analogies (film-syntax), he remained committed to the view that the cinema is a spectacle calculated for a spectator. But his vastly elaborate scenography suggests that he pushed the

mimetic position to an extreme. A man of the theater, he was formed in a period during which directors began to see the stage in a fresh way. His teachers, Meyerhold most notably, were rethinking the proscenium frame, the representation of depth, the spatial unity of the production, and the place of the audience. Like Meyerhold and Brecht, Eisenstein sought to make the stage a vehicle for an omniscient, ever-present narration. He thereby challenged Aristotle's assumption that theater invariably minimized the author's shaping hand.

Eisenstein's theory is "expressionist" in that it regards narration as the process of making manifest some essential emotional quality of the story. Throughout his career he insisted that representation involved not a simple and flat depiction but a heightening of the import and emotion of what was depicted.

At the earliest stage of his work, Eisenstein cast aside literary aspects of drama and grounded theatrical performance in expressive movement. Influenced by Meyerhold, by "eccentrism" in Soviet experimental theater, by reflex-centered theories of movement, and by the "expressive gymnastics" of Rudolf Bode, he trained actors to translate emotional states into sheerly physical reactions. In an early essay, written with Sergei Tretyakov, he asserted that even speech was a sort of "gesture" of the body.[44] "Realistic" acting was only a flattening and muting of expressive movement; Eisenstein argued for a maximal expressivity, even if this seemed stylized:

> You say, "But there are two," on the last word showing two extended fingers. And how much the persuasiveness of the phrase itself would be strengthened, the expressiveness of the intonation, if on the first words, you made a recoil movement with the body while raising the elbow, and then with an energetic movement you threw the torso and the hand with the extended fingers forward. Furthermore, the braking of the wrist would be so strongly directed that the wrist would vibrate (like a metronome). In the first instance you are dealing with partial thrust, in the second with organically [word omitted] movement of maximal exertion. Thus the expressiveness of movement, and with it, intonation as well, are not created by representational exactness, but by the energetic intensity of the gesture, which helps to develop the general thrust.[45]

Hence, when discussing cinema in 1922, Eisenstein praised American comedies, *policiers*, and adventure films and such expressive stars as Hart, Pickford, Fairbanks, Arbuckle, and above all Chaplin.[46] That such ideas remained crucial for him is shown by a 1939 photograph of a May Day float in which Eisenstein sits among three huge opened books, symbolizing his work in progress, *Direction*: the central volume is opened to the page entitled "Expressive Movement."

The purpose of this expressivity is the "persuasiveness" Eisenstein and Tretyakov mention. The agitprop theater of Eisenstein's time left its mark: throughout his career, he considered representation instrumentally, as a means of affecting the perceiver in specifiable ways. Expressive movement on stage would make the spectator imitate the movement in his or her own body, with a predetermined psychic effect. The viewer "reflexively repeats in weakened form the entire system of actor's movements: as a result of the produced movements, the spectator's incipient muscular tensions are released in the desired emotion."[47] Thus acting becomes real work, the processing of a material—the spectator.

Very soon, expressivity became the basis of the concept of the "attraction," that common denominator of theater which galvanizes the audience's perception. The attraction is a unit of spectatorial impact, gauged by its ability to administer perceptual and emotional shocks.[48] These attractions—not only the actor's movements but also setting, lighting, sound effects, and so on—formed an effective whole through "montage," the judicious assemblage of shocks that would lead the spectator to the proper ideological conclusion. In some respects, Eisenstein's "montage of attractions" was a more abstract reworking of ideas that had already appeared in a 1922 Feks (Factory of the Eccentric Actor) manifesto, but Eisenstein's version became the basis of a full-fledged

theory of film. For, as Eisenstein often remarked, cinema is a contemporary extension of theater.[49] Film has attractions too, and these function as stimuli for spectatorial response. These can be associated with one another through montage, which in cinema occurs through the joining of one piece of film with another. Properly controlled, the montage of film attractions would work directly on the spectator's nervous system, associating unconditioned reflexes with specific story events and creating new conditioned reflexes in relation to the theme the film seeks to inculcate. As in theater, the desired effect is at once perceptual, affective, and cognitive.

Eisenstein's 1920s writings on the cinema are chiefly of interest for the light they shed on style. Apparently under the influence of Soviet debates in psychology and philosophy, he sought in 1929 to create a "dialectical" approach to shooting and editing, claiming that graphic composition and other visual factors could create a conflict that would "explode" into the conflict between shots. In the same year he proposed that the filmmaker should seek to manipulate all the stimuli within each editing piece, not simply its "dominant" one; control of the basic "tone" and its "overtones" could yield a richer perceptual effect. By 1932, he was at work on *An American Tragedy*, which would try to render the protagonist's stream of consciousness. In all these years, certain narrational concerns remain central. The goal in *An American Tragedy* is "the expression of those subtleties of the inner struggle in all its nuances."[50] Eisenstein's theory of the dialectics of style is, he says, "fully analogous to human, psychological expression."[51] The methods of montage act on the spectator's "psycho-physiological complex" so as to create a predetermined effect in the manner of attractions.[52] Although Eisenstein's conception of mental activity seems to change significantly around 1930, human expressivity and spectatorial impact remain central.

Partly because of his emphasis on style, Eisenstein has little explicitly to say about plot construction. Indeed, at times he seems impatient that traditional notions of story limit his agitational purpose. It is clear, though, that for him narration in film would be an expressive representation of the story action. In particular writings, Eisenstein skirts many difficulties of the invisible-observer position. Because all that finally counts is response, Eisenstein can refuse Pudovkin's view of the profilmic event as an untransformed reality to be recorded by the camera and adjusted in editing. Instead, the profilmic event, as expressive movement or attraction, is *already* an expressively heightened representation of the thesis. Staging, on Eisenstein's account, is an initial processing of the ideological point to be communicated. Similarly, the camera is not a delegate for the spectator. It is an instrument for transforming the profilmic event so as to maximize effect. Nor does editing mimic the attention of an invisible observer. Editing, as the most palpable stage of montage construction, will often violate verisimilitude for the sake of impact. Perhaps most productive is the assumption that the story action is not in the film but in the spectator's mind; it becomes a construction which the viewer puts upon a configuration of stimuli. Eisenstein cites stereotyped association—e.g., murder inferred from opening eyes, a knife, drops of blood—and suggests that one could use other associations to construct completely new types of "stories" (Marx's *Capital*, Joyce's *Ulysses*).

It is in Eisenstein's notes, essays, and lectures between 1932 and 1947 that his version of a mimetic theory becomes most explicit. Now spectator effect is less bound to an ideological thesis, more allied with absorption in the narrative process itself. He demonstrates how the unfolding of an emotional donnée can become the basis of an entire work, from staging through editing. He posits various techniques to articulate the revelation of the emotional essence of the work. Mise-en-scène projects the emotional essence into the overall patterns of actor movement and stage space. Breaks with verisimilitude in setting or performance are permitted so long as they heighten the basic emotional point. Within mise-en-scène, the human figure is central, and Eisenstein speaks of *mise en jeu* (the actor's overall character portrayal) and *mise en geste* (the marked physical action of performance; individual expressive movements). Both aspects of acting can further intensify the donnée. Editing transforms theatrical mise-en-scène into shots, enjoying perfect free-

dom to emphasize or "falsify" the profilmic event for the sake of expressive impact. Finally, what he calls *mise en cadre* shapes each action for its composition within the frame.[53]

In Eisenstein's account there is the sense that the text before us, the play or the film, is the performance of a "prior" story. Eisenstein's work, both early and late, presupposes overt narration—not the speaking voice of language or literature, but an invisible master of ceremonies who has staged this action, chosen these camera positions, and edited the images in just this way. The expressionist emphasis of Eisenstein's theory of direction assures a continual awareness of the director's shaping hand. If he had to show a figure fallen from a great height, Eisenstein explained, he would do everything necessary to make the event forceful: incline the surface which the figure falls upon, use diagonal architecture "to nail the attention of the viewer to the figure," have a woman drop crosswise upon the figure, and employ starkly opposed costume colors to emphasize the elements of the design.[54] He did not add that such a maniacally explicit representation points silently but unambiguously to a maker. The very terms he uses stress the creator's intervention—not only "montage" as creative assembly but the recurring prefix *mise* as an acknowledgment that acting and setting and framing are *put in place* by some overriding intelligence. By seeking the maximally expressive unfolding of an emotional essence, Eisenstein makes the entire representation into a narrator's interpretation of the emotional donnée, just as we speak of a stage director's "interpretation" of a play. At one point, Eisenstein even considered representing the narrator on the screen. He recalled that in his scenario for *MMM* (1932–1933), the intrigue becomes so tangled that the camera backs off, the tiled floor of the setting turns out to be a giant chessboard, and while the characters stand waiting, the screenwriter and the director sit tearing their hair trying to solve the plot problem.[55]

Eisenstein's work, even in its late phase, does not constitute a theory of narration. Scrappy, ad hoc, and idiosyncratic, the ideas are geared primarily to his filmmaking practice. Their limitations are often those of the mimetic position generally—an emphasis on vision and a neglect of thinking, a tendency to atomism in the explanation of effects. But in Eisenstein we see a brilliant filmmaker, working in an era that did not pose the problem of narration as we would, straining against the invisible-observer account. His insistence that the profilmic event is already narrational, his attempt to treat all film techniques as potentially equivalent instruments, and his assumption that the spectator constructs the story out of stimuli—all these are indispensable to an adequate theory of narration, and we shall have occasion to return to them throughout this book.